

Feldman - Final letter to McCormick - Rev. 8/24/07

Rabbi Norman Lamm
Chancellor
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Dear Rabbi Lamm:

I read with great interest your letter to Noah Feldman (Jewish Daily Forward, August 2, 2007) admonishing him to fix the damage you suggest he inflicted on the Jewish community and on a certain Daniel of your acquaintance, in particular.

I hope he will do as you did, write back, and make his remarks public. This is an issue of tremendous importance to Americans and to all people living in a modern pluralist democracy.

Your differences line you up in the current culture war between those inclined toward one or another authoritarian tradition on the one hand, and those inspired by enlightenment notions of universal human equality on the other. You may prefer to keep this Jewish, but as long as you are in America, the larger culture, I believe, will frame the questions and invite outside participation as well.

Pope Benedict XVI's recent call for Roman Catholics to renew their conviction that access to heaven is limited to his narrow gate will be rejected by most of us, Roman Catholics included, for the parochial view it is, and his prayers for your conversion, now that his church has lost its teeth, will come across more as pitiful than insulting. How can your claim to have the keys to a narrow Jewish truth help but come across similarly?

Just as you suggested Noah Feldman benefits from the orthodoxy he criticizes, you benefit, unless you close yourself off from it, from the fresh air of the Enlightenment. The freedom from Roman Catholic oppression which once created considerable misery for Jews and other non-catholics is the same freedom Professor Feldman has sought and found from ways of being Jewish that shut out an embrace of the benefits of experience. He is not rejecting Judaism; he is exemplifying what makes it universal. Defining your tradition as Jewish Orthodox, but not as simultaneously Jeffersonian and Spinozan is analogous to embracing your father's wisdom and denying your mother's.

What a shame you should throw in your lot with authoritarian Catholicism and authoritarian Islam. Whatever wisdom has been generated by religious traditions, no one has resisted the temptations for corruption that come with the institutionalization of conviction. One wonders if Jewish Orthodoxy has been less of a threat only for lack of numbers.

Theoretically, it ought to be possible to espouse a moral universality while holding fast to a social particularism. The Jewish experiment which has become the tragedy that is Israel, however, suggests this may be no more readily accomplished than was the American experiment in Separate But Equal.

As you conclude in your letter to Professor Feldman, Judaism will survive in spite of human error, yours, his or anybody else's.

Acceptance of outmarriage is the first step not to the dissolution not of Judaism but to the mindset that Jews have nothing to learn from others. America has shown that Jews can influence as much as they are influenced and we are all the richer for it. If your fears of extinction as a people mean rejecting love, respect and emulation, then what have you to offer the world?

Obviously blacks who want to marry other blacks, and Greeks other Greeks, have a human right to do so. But when they choose to cross interracial or interethnic lines, should we not see this as a sign of human progress? Or is it only Jews that you want to live on islands? Is that why God put us together on a single planet? There is evidence that the misery of racism, that greatest of all American evils, is crumbling at last. Is it wrong to see Jewish outmarriage in the same light?

Growing up among Conservative, Reformed and Reconstructionist Jews has made me understand that culturally, I am Jewish. To the same degree I am Italian and I am Japanese. Your disparagement of those Jews who taught me to see Judaism as an integral part of my civilization strikes me as a destructive force. Your implication that they are lesser Jews than you may satisfy your sense of righteousness, just as the pope's belief praying for the conversion of the Jews supports his faith. But adhering to a logic of isolation, tribalism and apartheid should not be the only way to be a Jew.

You read Professor Feldman's complaint as a self-indulgence and a betrayal of community. I read it as a confession of a man conflicted by multiple identities who describes his life as a work in progress. You want him to come back to where the wagons are circled. I hope he will continue to articulate the ways in which his worldviews and values are inspired, but not limited, by his Jewish origins.

With respect,

Alan J. McCornick